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ABSTRACT

Problems and perspectives about the college professoriate are discussed. Attention is directed to: organization and location of graduate programs; enrollment declines and fluctuation; scholarly activities of professors; consulting and field work; and teaching. One of the recent developments of higher education as a field of study has been that programs have increasingly been merged into other programs in schools of education. Beginning about 1980, the field of higher education began to decline as a result of budget cuts and the failure of many higher education programs to develop a firm political base on campus. Research in higher education has found itself with decreased financial support from foundations and from the federal government during the past decade. Young faculty who began in the 1970s and 1980s have tended to be interested in developing theoretical models. Tight budgets have also precluded many colleges from bringing in outside consultants. The range of opportunities in field work for higher education programs is limited, and there is an absence of a common knowledge base for students undertaking a doctorate in the field. Because of the smallness of many programs in higher education, professors tend to be generalists since they have to cover a vast number of topics in courses. It is concluded that doctoral programs in higher education face an uncertain future. (SW)

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HIGHER EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF STUDY: SOME FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Higher Education as a Field of Study: Some Future Prospects

The Association for the Study of Higher Education recently identified ninety-two programs in higher education which were staffed by 140 professors. This presents an average of slightly more than one and a half professors per program. Thus higher education is a relatively small field of study which is limited on the campuses where it is offered by having a very small faculty in general. While there are some exceptions to this, particularly in the centers where the study of higher education may number as many as ten faculty, oftentimes we find that one person will serve as the basic staff for the program.

This article will discuss problems and perspectives of the higher education professoriate along these lines: First, organization and location of the programs. Next, second, enrollment declines and fluctuation. Third research and scholarly activities of professors of higher education. Fourth, consulting and field work. Fifth, teaching in higher education programs. And finally, some conclusions.

Organization and Location

One of the recent developments in higher education as a field of study has been that programs have increasingly been merged into other programs in schools of education. Indeed, schools of education themselves are being reorganized. This seems to be a result of the recent recession with the

concomitant budget cuts to universities in which the total university's programs were scrutinized. The momentum of such scrutiny has continued beyond the recession to reexamine whether university schools of education should continue to offer the same specialties they traditionally have. Should some programs be eliminated? Should some be expanded by offering work in allied professional fields? Higher education as a special field within the college of education has been merged perhaps most often into public school leadership and administration. While there are certian political advantages potentially to be gained through such a merger, mainly in voting numbers, there are also some disadvantages, the most obvious of which is that the identity of the program in higher education may well become submerged.

The possibility of locating programs in higher education in another part of the university perhaps attached to the graduate school, has never caught on to any great extent (Cooper, 1970). As a result, the utilization of scholars from other disciplines such as history, psychology, economics, political science, anthropology, and philosophy in joint appointments with programs of higher education has been quite limited.

Enrollment Declines

Higher education came of age as a field of study in the early 1960s. Prior to that time the professoriate was drawn largely from scholars in other disciplines whose interest had turned to the context of higher education and whose

teaching and scholarly work in higher education tended to be limited to the application of their basic disciplines to the study of higher education. Another such group of faculty were practitioners from administrative positions in community colleges and universities who often entered the programs at tenured senior ranks and were not particularly oriented to research or scholarly activity.

Beginning in the early 1960s a new generation of professors of higher education came on the market, having taken their Ph.D. degrees in higher education itself and who increasingly became interested in the theoretical rather than the practitioner aspects of the study and the teaching of higher education. This continued through the rest of the 1960s and 1970s. However, beginning about 1980, the momentum that had propelled higher education as a field of study into some realms of recognition and status began to decline. This was brought about by the recession and its attendant budget cuts and by the failure of many higher education programs to develop a firm political base on campus. Add, too, the fact that upward mobility for graduate students in higher education careers became sharply curtailed as a result of lack of opportunities for higher administrative positions. Such positions became increasingly scarce, because many vacancies were not filled or were merged with other administrative positions. As a result, enrollment in higher education programs declined in many universities, and increasing numbers of students began to select other professional fields which offered a number

of outlets for their specialization. Thus, the problem in many programs of higher education was that of maintaining a sufficient enrollment to justify to university administrators the continuation of the program, at least as a separate program.

Research

Research in higher education has found itself with decreased financial support from foundations and the federal government during the past decade. Probably this is due in the case of foundations to interests turning more toward other fields and other programs that were not in the higher education context. In the case of government support, higher education lost its momentum particularly through the disappointing performance of such federal organizations as the separate Department of Education, which was created during the Carter administration, and the National Institute for Education, which goes further back but which has never been particularly interested in higher education as opposed to basic education. The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education did for a time supply considerable financial support for creative short-term experimental activities in postsecondary education, but several years ago it seemed to become obscured with reorganizational considerations. As a result of both this and the basic philosphy of the program, FIPSE has never made significant inroads into programs in higher education or into providing major research funds for faculty in the field of higher education.

Along with the above developments, the increasing numbers of young faculty who entered the professoriate in the 1970s and 1980s tended to be more interested in developing theoretical models. Often they utilized quantitative methodology in their treatment of data and did research that was more limited in scope than had been the case in the past. While providing a certain base of data for the study of higher education on the one hand, the arcane work of many of these individuals also led to a decreasing readership and to a smaller audience for research papers being presented in higher education.

ASHE itself has evolved to the point that no longer is it basically an association for professors of higher education. Instead professors of higher education now make up only about twenty percent of the total membership of ASHE (Newell and Morgan study of 1980). The remaining eighty percent consists of practitioners of various sorts such as administrators, institutional research specialists, and others who present papers both at the annual conferences of ASHE and in the Review of Higher Education which appeal less to those iterested in the study of higher education than was formerly the case.

Consulting and Field Work

Consulting opportunities have declined in higher education. One of the main reasons for this is that tight budgets of the last five years or so have in many instances precluded the setting aside of money to bring outside consultants to individual colleges and universities. In

many instances the professional staff members of such organizations have themselves assumed the duties of consultants. Another consideration may be that the era of consultants has perhaps passed its zenith. During the 1960s and part of the 1970s it was the fashionable thing to do to bring in consultants who helped institutions with problems ranging from alternative plans that the institution might undertake all the way to presenting a September faculty orientation program. This is no longer done to the same extent.

The range of opportunities in field work for the higher educationist is peculiarly limited compared with those in many other specialties in education. Unlike many other organizations that seek consultants, colleges and universities look for advice primarily from institutions of greater prestige than their own. Moreover, there must not be any rivalry between the two institutions involved. Thus, while there is still considerable consulting work by higher educationists with community college, for example, such is not the case with ambitious upward-seeking regional universities that aspire to the positions of prestige of the research universities.

Teaching in Higher Education Programs

One of the perennial problems which has not yet been seriously addressed is the absence of a common knowledge base for all students who would take a doctorate in higher education. This is unlike most of the doctoral programs in other disciplines in which there is an agreed upon list of

courses and seminars which every such student is expected to pass. There is a reading list of classics that every such student is expected to have read. There are certain research methodologies unique to that discipline that every student is expected to have mastered. This is not yet the case in the contextual field of higher education. The programs in higher education can differ greatly one from the other with more differences than commonality as judged from the 1984 ASHE research on programs in higher education (Nelson and Crosson, 1984). Until we acquire such a common knowledge base and enforce it within our program, it seems unlikely that we can expect much recognition as a profession of higher education or as a field of study, much less a discipline.

Faculty members in higher education programs were surveyed in 1980 (Newell and Morgan, 1980). Among their findings are the following: Professors of higher education would like to do slightly less teaching than they currently do; they would like to have time for more research and more writing; they would like to continue doing the same amount of field activity which they currently do; they would like to be less involved in committee work within their own institutions; and they would like to be less involved with university administration. But in general the professoriate in higher education seem to evince reasonable satisfaction with their working environment.

Faculty members in higher education programs are, however, getting older. They are not reproducing themselves. Most of the graduates of doctoral programs in higher education go into practitioner roles, particularly into administration or working with statewide coordinating agencies, institutional research, student services, and the like. Relatively few are entering the professorship of higher education. This means that the infusion of fresh and creative ideas is on the wane and will continue this path as faculty members collectively, in higher education, become more tenured-in and represent a relatively older segment of the university population.

Because of the smallness of the programs in higher education for the most part as referred to at the beginning of the paper, it continues to be extremely difficult for the professoriate to assume the role as specialists in various higher education areas. Rather, such professors tend to be generalists because of the vast number of topics in higher education which they must present in their courses. They also are spread thin by various expectations within their home institutions. Oftentimes a professor of higher education will be expected to teach courses which are not in higher education, even sometimes undergraduate courses, in order to maintain a full teaching load as required by university policy. This only adds to the feeling of frustration of those higher educationists who would prefer to specialize. However, professors of higher education have significantly increased their rate of publication during the

last decade, including both books and articles in professional journals. This suggests that there is a real effort to develop a literature of higher education, which would represent a step in the right direction. Perhaps from such an effort there will result a more common knowledge base within the field. However, the development of theory in higher education is still very limited. It is, in fact, a subject to which relatively little work has been directed.

Conclusions

We can safely say that doctoral programs in higher education face an uncertain future. They are most certainly not expanding with anything like the momentum of the past two decades. Indeed, some have been phased out, others have been merged with other programs in education, some continue as they have been, and a few continue to grow. Probably the vast majority of these programs are simply striving for survival until such time as they can redefine their goals, clietele, and the nature of the staff that they wish to involve; at least until they can secure a more solid political base on the campus.

Whether programs in higher education will continue to serve the multifarious expectations which have been placed on them remains to be seen. Very possibly they will decide or it may well be decided for them to curtail the scope of their offerings from a full doctoral level program to a supporting area which may be chosen by students coming from other particular majors but who wish to practice their specialties in institutions of higher education. Another

possibility would be to retain doctoral work in higher education but with specialization in fewer aspects of it than has been the case of the the past two decades. For example, with the Kellogg grants of the early 1960s, a number of institutions specialized in the preparation of community college leaders since at that time community colleges were rapidly growing in most states and certainly were the subject of a great deal of attention in every state. Probably fewer such programs are needed at present. Perhaps it is not necessary that programs in higher education accommodate all of the many interests of various persons who might enter them at the present. They might seek instead to develop expertise and excellence in a small number of specialties, somewhat akin to the early Clark University when G. Stanley Hall was its president.

An argument to be advanced is the possibility of merging higher education with other disciplines thus forming a completely new department within the university, not necessarily within a college of education. This would be consistent with the recent thinking among those university administrators who ask, "Do we have the university organized along the teaching lines that are best for the mid-1980s and beyond, or should we dismantle the schools and departments and reassemble the component parts into new lines of instruction and scholarly endeavor?" While this approach would meet with a great deal of faculty resistance, particularly in those disciplines which are apparently riding high in terms of support, enrollments, and market

demands, it does not necessarily follow that all such disciplines will retain their present identity exactly as it is today. With the emergence of new specialties, many of which have utility in several parts of the campus, it may well be that higher education, particularly with its potential role of assisting and preparing the professoriate for academe generally, may well find a broader scope of possible activities than has been available in the past.